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“COULEUR LOCALE” IN THE FRENCH CLASSROOM

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After a few years of wrestling with pupils of various degrees of intelligence, nowhere so glaringly apparent as in the French class, the average French teacher is usually content to sum up his ambitions in the following prayer: “May my students at least learn to read French understandingly without translating; may they be able to write it without too many mistakes in their subjunctives and participles; and may they acquire such facility in speaking the language and in understanding it from my lips as may be expected from the far from supple *gosiers* and dull ears with which an ungenerous nature has too often provided them; in short, let me consecrate my energies toward speeding them as far as possible on the difficult road that leads to the mastery of the most charming language that the Creator has ever put into the mouth of man.” Everyone will admit that this triple aim is far from modest, and the majority of French teachers regard it as all-sufficient; yet even in the pursuing of a purpose as comprehensive as this, they often lose sight of another desirable and noble ideal, of secondary value perhaps, but which, if joined with the others, would make them seem less difficult of attainment. This is the striving to bring a French atmosphere into the classroom.

Ideal conditions would naturally demand that the classroom be a veritable corner of France, with nothing in sight or hearing to suggest the all too near America. This is, of course, impracticable and impossible. What is possible, however, is to require that there be something distinctively French about it; that the student should feel immediately on entering that he is coming into close and pleasant contact with another country whose language he is trying to learn. Everything about him should excite his curiosity about the wonders of a foreign life and art, with which he can for the present become familiar only through its literature, but which he perceives as a pleasant vista, opening alluringly before him, and promising future delights

in the shape of literary study, of foreign travel, of keen insight into the French character; in short, of all the joys that come to him who knows and loves the best that France has to give us.

How is this *couleur locale* to be obtained? One way is by the use of mural decorations. Numerous photographs dealing with French subjects are a strong, unconscious stimulus to curiosity about French life. Pictures of French cathedrals; of the *châteaux* of Touraine; of peasant scenes in Brittany, Provence, or Normandy; of the dramatic moments in French history; of the numerous monuments in Paris; of the gay modern life on the boulevards and in the Latin Quarter or the parks of this magic city that every French teacher loves as a second country—any or all of these would find a most fitting abiding-place on the walls of any room where French is taught. Many may object that these are too expensive, but let me suggest two forms of mural decoration that are within the reach of small purses, and that are even better than pictures. These are French calendars and the play-bills of French theaters. Any foreign bookstore in this country would gladly furnish the former, and the latter can be procured directly from Paris, either through friends or by correspondence with any seller of theater tickets. Even the most intellectually weak student cannot fail to master the names of the months and of the days of the week, when confronted with them day after day, while the name of the saint that appears with each day is useful in showing the usual French custom of naming children and of celebrating birthdays. On the other hand, a student with a play-bill of the Comédie Française constantly before his eyes gets a glimpse of the best the world has yet produced in the line of dramatic art and has a mind prepared to receive the many interesting details about French theaters that come up in connection with the class reading of any French play—details that he is sure to need, for no French course is complete that does not introduce the student to the wealth of French theatrical literature. Let me say here that anything I may say with regard to French classrooms will apply equally well to those in which German is taught, and that the manager of the Irving Place Theater in New York has shown himself most kind and generous in his willingness to supply German classrooms with playbills from his German theater. It is to be hoped that teachers will repay his kindness by using his play-

bills as texts for talks on the superiority of the Irving Place Theater over any other in New York, or, in fact, in the United States.

Another way to bring the student in direct contact with France is by the use of French texts. I mean texts published in France, and not the condensed, expurgated, hyperannotated, and prefaced American editions of French works, with the name of the American editor in bold letters on the cover and that of the French author off in a corner in small type. Salt without savor, these books are often so Americanized that one forgets their French origin. Such are helpful and necessary to first-year students of French, but after the first year the student should get his knowledge, so far as possible, through a French medium, should hunt up his words in a *Petit Dictionnaire Larousse*, and should have recourse to the teacher for enlightenment as to whatever is obscure in the text. Compare, for example, the French editions of Daudet's *Le Petit Chose* and *La Belle Nivernaise*, so charming in their illustrations, with the American editions of the same books and the latter have little to recommend them and suffer by comparison. The same is true of the scholarly editions of the French classics, with their lucid annotations and clever criticisms, in use in the *lycées* of France, as compared with the meager American editions of the same works. An American student wants not only to read the play, but also to know what Frenchmen think about it. American ideas on the same subject he can get from his teacher, or better still form them for himself. Supposing the work is too long to be read in the class, is not it better that the student have the complete work before him, and thus have an opportunity of at least skimming over the omitted portions, even if he has not time to look up every word? Many teachers weighed down by the burden of a Puritan ancestry will strenuously object to putting unexpurgated French books into the hands of their scholars, fearing lest the white souls of high-school students or the slightly dingy ones of college men and women be besmirched by contact with the *esprit gaulois*. Life is full of inevitable surprises for the young, and it will do them no harm to meet some of them in French literature. French books were written for French readers, and there are few that do not contain a word here and there that American good taste would reject; but a judicious selection of books would reduce this supposed evil to a minimum.

Another French text that should be put into the hands of second-year French students is any one of Lavisse's elementary histories of France. Their value is both pedagogical and atmospheric, if I may so express myself and use the word in the sense of contributing to the *couleur locale* of the classroom. These little histories play an important rôle in French schools, and should in ours. With their numerous illustrations, simple easy style, and lucid philosophical development of the main points of French history, itself so dramatic in outline and detail, they form an admirable basis for class conversation, as a pupil may be assigned in them a short lesson to be learned as he would a lesson in English history. Then, too, the knowledge thus gained furnishes an indispensable background for the study of French literature, a knowledge too often sadly lacking, even in many mature students, who have been known to confuse Napoleon I with Napoleon III, the French Revolution with the Franco-Prussian War, and who have extremely hazy ideas as to what century beheld the magnificence of Louis XIV. Such a state of ignorance is deplorable in anyone, most of all in a French student, and the teacher who assigns a short history lesson daily not only gives his pupils valuable subject-matter for conversational drill, but also puts into their hands an attractive French textbook which gives them the French boy's point of view toward the history of France.

The tendency of modern education is to hunt for the proverbially impossible royal road to learning, and while we know that for years we must grind away on principles, we can at least give the student glimpses of the joys to come when he can appreciate French life and letters, when he has learned to love a country to which many educated men are indebted directly or indirectly for their admiration for artistic form and their freedom from the shackles of philistinism. This appreciation and admiration must owe their chief development to the enthusiasm and scholarship of the teacher, but they may often be stimulated and fostered by the *couleur locale* of the classroom; indeed, they may often owe their very life and birth to the same strong, subtle influence.